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The Goal of Christian Oneness

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Text: John 17:20-26

We Lutherans hold firmly to the conviction that the one thing that will bring people to Christ is the proclamation of the gospel. In John's Gospel Christ says that if he is lifted up, he will draw all people to him. Our Lutheran church people have always taken seriously the task of lifting up Christ, pointing to Christ and not to ourselves. Keenly aware that we are at one and the same time justified and sinful, we have not supposed that we could appear as such models of virtue that looking at us would win people to Christ. Therefore, our only hope is to proclaim the good news that comes to us from God through Christ.

In the passage selected for this service, however, Jesus points to something that we dare not forget. Looking at us may not bring people to Christ, but looking at us may keep people from really seeing or hearing the message of Christ. This passage is part of an extended prayer of Jesus. Jesus has prayed for his disciples who are to remain in the world when he is no longer with them. In our passage, Jesus moves out from the disciples to pray for the church that is to come into existence; that is, he prays for the church through the ages, he prays for us. His prayer is that Christians may be one even as Jesus and God are one, and he gives the reason: "so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

This point is so important that after Jesus says it in verse 21, he goes on in verse 23 to pray that Christians may be "perfectly" one and repeats the reason that the world may know that God has sent Christ. But this time he adds that

the world also may know that God loves it. Jesus is clearly affirming that Christians divided against each other, Christians lacking in love, are a hindrance to people hearing the gospel message.

I remember as a child hearing this little story. A young boy was visiting a Sunday School. As the proceedings were going on the visitor began to feel more and more uncomfortable because the assumption of everyone around him seemed to be that they had a monopoly on Christian faith. Finally the teacher called out, "Everyone who wants to go to heaven, put up your hands." Everyone's hands shot up except for the visitor. The teacher looked at him in amazement and said, "Don't you want to go to heaven?" The little boy responded quickly, "Oh yes, I would like to go to heaven, but I don't want to go with this gang." That story is a parable for the church. It reminds us that all too often people look at us in the church and decide that they don't want to go to heaven with this gang.

One of the persistent reports that we get from mission fields is that a major barrier to bringing people to Christian faith is the division of the churches. Non-Christians are bewildered when they hear Christian groups differing from each other, condemning each other and even declaring that the other groups are not really Christian. We not infrequently hear from the mission fields of recent converts to Christianity being approached by other Christians who tell them that now they are worse off than before because the group they have joined is not really Christian at all. Is it any wonder that many confused people on such mission fields find it difficult to believe that God has sent Christ? The philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, once said to Christians, "I might believe in your redeemer if I could see some evidence that you had been redeemed." That is the way many non-Christians feel when they see Christians divided from each other.

If the division of Christians in general has made it difficult for many to hear the message, the division of Lutherans in North America has, for many years, made it difficult for many to hear the Lutheran interpretation of the faith. Lutherans divided into many churches, Lutherans squabbling with Lutherans, Lutherans unable to share the Lord's Supper with other Lutherans; such actions have not inspired confidence in

the message we have tried to proclaim. We are thankful that, through the years, many of these divisions have been healed.

Today, as we heal one more of the divisions of Lutheranism and thus of the church of Jesus Christ, we are acting in the spirit of Jesus' prayer. Those of us who served on the Merger Commission are keenly aware that we did not arrive at this movement easily or without frustration and sometimes despair. But through it all we persevered because we had faith that we were following in the spirit of Jesus' prayer that we might be one. And today we celebrate that fact.

But even as we celebrate, let us not forget that being one as Jesus and God are one, is not the same thing as merging two churches into one. Churches can be merged and still not be truly one. During the United States civil war the Methodist church was divided into a North and South denomination. During this century they reunited. And yet, after they were reunited, at the time of the civil rights crisis, a colleague of mine from Garrett, a Methodist minister, was arrested for trying to enter a Methodist church accompanied by another Methodist minister whose skin was black. Uniting the headquarters of two churches into one headquarters does not necessarily lead to the oneness that Jesus and God demonstrate to us.

The divisions of the church are not simply denominational differences. As my illustration shows, the church is often divided racially. When the Lutheran World Federation declared that the South African practice of apartheid is a matter of heresy, it recognized that some of the worst divisions of the church today are racial.

The church is divided sexually. Women have not been granted a place of equality in the church. There are many women in the world today who cannot hear the good news in Christ that the church proclaims because within the church itself, it often seems there is no good news for women. Although women constitute at least half of the church's membership, they have never shared equally in the places where the real decisions about the church and its life are made. The overwhelmingly male membership of our Merger Commission is just one more example of this. Oh, we have made some progress; no church committee is now considered complete without a woman on it, but we are far from giving them an equal place.

The church is divided socially. The poor, the oppressed, still are not comfortable in our churches. By and large we are a rather nice middle class group of people and we like to keep it that way. And that is why we make it difficult for many in our society to believe that God sent Christ.

And so today, as we give thanks that we have taken this important step in fulfilling Christ's prayer that we may be one, may we also soberly recall that we still have a long way to go. First, let us become truly one within our new church. That means being open to all races and particularly to the aboriginal people of our land, to women and to the poor of our communities. Also it means overcoming the persistent Canadian division of East and West within our church. In the Merger Commission, the East-West tension raised its ugly head many times. Before Christ's prayer is fulfilled, we must overcome that.

But let us also recall that even if the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada is fully one within itself, Christ's prayer is still awaiting fulfillment. When we started the discussion of merger, there were three of us and we dreamed of one Lutheran church in Canada. Today Missouri is not with us. I hope that we do not rest on the laurels of today's achievement. I hope that we let it be known that we are still looking for the time to come when the dream of one Lutheran church in Canada will be fulfilled. May the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod know that we earnestly seek a closer oneness with them.

But even one Lutheran church would not fulfill Jesus' prayer. I recall back in the days of the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships, Otto Olson said that there was a danger in our inter-Lutheran discussions. For all of our differences, it was a comfortable family squabble and we could use it to justify ourselves in not seeking oneness with other denominations. I hope that our new church will be an ecumenical church, for otherwise it will deny Jesus' prayer that we be one. I do not believe that Jesus' prayer means that we have to amalgamate all denominations into one super church. Once the church was united in a single organization and its history was not a pretty picture of the oneness that exists between God and Christ. True ecumenicity means that although we have different organizations and headquarters, we recognize Christian sisters and brothers in other denominations. Further,

we strive to find ways to work with them in common Christian endeavors, we learn from them and hopefully we may teach them.

The goal of Christian oneness, held up in Christ's prayer, is not something that can be attained easily or by human efforts alone. Jesus knew that and so he closed his prayer by affirming that he had made God's name known to his followers and that he had made known God's love. No Christian can truly love another person until she or he knows that they are loved. We love because God first loved us. That love of God needs continually to be expressed to us—the love which accepts us as we are, where we are. And because we are accepted, we can accept others.

That is why it is fitting that we commune together at this hour. We are invited to this Lord's table because God loves us, seeks us and forgives us. In the bread and wine the love of God in Christ comes to us to renew us and to embrace us. Because we have here experienced this love of God, we can by God's grace love others. And then we may be one, even as God and Christ are one, so that we are no longer a hindrance to the world's hearing the message we are called to tell the world. The message that God so loved the world that Christ was sent for you and for me.